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Stigmata

Abstract

This is a review of *Stigmata* (1999).

You do not expect to find religion and spirituality in a horror film, but *Stigmata* successfully weaves the three together. The film enacts studied descriptions of mystical and demonic possessions, filmed to occur amidst ordinary people. The resulting story provides some excitement, some arguments in favor of spirituality, and some attacks on the corrupt and competitive character of the Roman Catholic Church.

The center of the fictional story is a young, independent woman, Frankie Paige (Patricia Arquette) living in Pittsburgh, PA. Her mother travels to Brazil, and sends Frankie a packet of souvenirs, including the rosary of a devout and recently deceased priest and ancient languages translator, Fr. Alameida. With the rosary comes to Frankie herself the crisis of the film. She experiences in stages the "stigmata," that is, the five wounds of Christ on the cross: physical wounds resulting from spikes through the wrists and feet, from a crown of thorns on the head, from lashing of the back, and from a spear through the side.

These wounds, we eventually learn, result from a still-continuing struggle between God and Satan in the spirit of the deceased priest and translator. That embattled spirit, transmitted by the rosary, now resides in Frankie.

The priest-translator had wanted people to learn the authentic teachings of Christ, revealed in a newly-discovered Gospel, the Gospel of Thomas. This Gospel

diminished the importance of institutional religion and proclaimed the immediate presence of God and his kingdom to everyone, universally, without need for religious buildings and institutions. Yet attacking the spirit of this priest, who wants to proclaim this Gospel, is another spirit, the kind of demon that only attacks the holiest and most devout of people. Such a demon assails people with such ferocity that the wounds of Christ are visited upon their bodies (as they were on the bodies of Francis of Assisi and of Italian Padre Pio—a favorite of Pope John Paul II).

Into this fray are introduced two other representatives of good and evil. One is the young and handsome priest, Andrew Kiernan (Gabriel Byrne), who works for the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, attempting to debunk false claims to miracles. As chance would have it, his travels for the Vatican allow him both to see the body of the dead translator-priest in Brazil and also to find Frankie in Pittsburgh. Concerned by the abnormal suffering visited upon Frankie, his feelings grow to protect and care for her.

His boss at the Vatican, however, is Cardinal Houseman. This man is the image of sophisticated evil in the Church. His dedication is to protect the Church's monopoly of spiritual power against competition from whatever outside sources. In this case, it is the new Gospel that Cardinal Houseman wants to destroy, along with the holy and demonic spirits that have invaded Frankie's life.

In the midst of the resulting preternatural and human struggles, we not only get to witness some amazing mechanical representations of possession but also get to know a bit about the characters as well. Sometimes possessed and sometimes ordinary, Frankie lets us know that she is not religious and not spiritual, not even believing in God. Yet she tells a friend that believing in God as savior might be better than having God hate you—the fate she fears has been visited upon herself.

Frankie seems to endure increasing levels of pain as more and more of the five wounds of Christ are visited upon her. Bath-tubs tumble in the air, subway cars rock as if in an earthquake, displays of fresh flowers crash like hurricane-driven waves, and Frankie is levitated as if on a cross. In one time of possession, she attacks both Fr. Kiernan and herself with a knife. Twice, spiritual and physical forces take her to the edge of death.

There are some significant flaws in the representation of the official Catholic response to the gospels and fragments of gospels that were not included in the Bible(s) of Christianity. They were excluded in the ancient past because their later dates of composition threatened their authenticity and because, regardless of their date, they were too "dualistic." That is, they discounted too much the value of the human body and of the material world, affirming too exclusively the importance of escape from the world and body to a happier spiritual reality. The fact is that despite concluding words on the screen, the church does not condemn the

publication of these gospels and gospel fragments. They are readily available in a variety of scholarly sources.

Despite this and other flaws in representing institutional Catholicism, and even though it is far from a worthy history of stigmata or ancient gospels, *Stigmata* is well worth seeing and will spark some valuable conversation.